



Replacing South Fork Bridge

The South Fork Bridge spans the South Fork of the Merced Wild and Scenic River and is located on the Wawona Road (Highway 41) within the Wawona developed area. Approximately one third of Yosemite's visitors travel to the park via Highway 41 and Wawona Road, crossing the South Fork on the South Fork Bridge. As such, this bridge is an important component of Yosemite National Park's transportation infrastructure.



The bridge was constructed in 1931 and reconstructed in 1938 after a flood, in order to replace the wooden guardrails and meet safety standards of the period. It is a narrow, somewhat hazardous bridge that has been little modified throughout the years except for routine maintenance. The triple-span bridge is 134 feet long and 29 feet wide with two 10-foot wide travel lanes, and consists of steel girders, a laminated timber deck, and an asphalt surface. The bridge is supported by two unreinforced masonry/cobble abutments and two unreinforced instream piers.

Why is the bridge being replaced?

In 1992, the bridge was inspected and determined to be critically deficient, but was allowed to remain in service at a reduced load limit of 9 tons. In 1993, a scour hole was discovered under one of the piers during a subsurface investigation. In 1996, an environmental assessment was released detailing the removal and replacement of the South Fork Bridge. A Finding of No Significant Impact was signed and the design phase for the project was underway. Then, in January of 1997, flood waters caused additional scour and undermining which elevated the safety concerns. As a result, the bridge was closed in 1998 after a temporary bypass bridge was installed to serve as an interim fix. This temporary bypass bridge has served beyond its original intent and is creating a visual intrusion on an otherwise popular scenic location.

A 1999 lawsuit on the El Portal Road Improvements Project resulted in halting the plans to remove the South Fork Bridge until completion of an approved comprehensive management plan for the Merced Wild and Scenic River. A Record of Decision on the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan* was signed in August 2000 and revised in November 2000. An additional lawsuit prevented the further progress of this project, until a July 7, 2004 decision that allowed it to move forward.

What are the key resource concerns?

The original bridge piers and abutments obstructed flow on a Wild and Scenic River. The proposed single span structure will improve the free-flowing condition on the South Fork of the Merced River.

The cultural values of the surrounding area are significant since Wawona is the first "developed" area in Yosemite National Park. The South Fork Bridge is located within the Wawona Archeological District and is near such popular sites as the Wawona Hotel and Pioneer Yosemite History Center. Visitors to this area enjoy golfing, photography, fishing, swimming, and learning about Wawona's significance in the creation of Yosemite National Park.

What is the current status of this project?

PROJECT TIMELINE

Construction contract awarded:	March 2005
Demolition of the existing bridge begins:	Summer 2005
Replacement bridge completed:	Summer 2006

An updated Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was signed on July 24, 2003. This determination found that the bridge replacement (as analyzed in its environmental assessment) would not significantly affect the quality of the South Fork of the Merced Wild and Scenic River. The environmental assessment for this project was released to the public in April 2003, followed by a 30- day public comment period.

When did bridge removal occur?

Demolition on the condemned bridge began during the spring of 2005. As of July 20, 2005, 90% of the old bridge had been removed and during the last week in July crews will begin placing the footings for the new concrete abutments. It is anticipated that the replacement bridge will be in use by September 2006. Once the replacement bridge is in place, the temporary bridge will be removed.

The bridge removal and replacement project eliminates an immediate safety hazard and negative impacts to the free- flowing character of the South Fork of the Merced River.

Public Participation

Public participation in the planning process is critical. Here are some ways to stay involved in the South Fork Bridge Replacement Project:

Add your name to the park's planning mailing list (to address/fax/email below) and receive the *Planning Update* newsletter as well as other planning- related notices. You can also submit your email address to receive Yosemite National Park's periodic electronic newsletter.

- Mail: Superintendent
Attn: Planning Mailing List
P.O. Box 577
Yosemite, CA 95389
- Fax: 209/379- 1294
- Email: Yose_Planning@nps.gov

To learn more about this and other Yosemite construction projects visit Yosemite's planning website at www.nps.gov/yose/planning/.